Library Review

Emerald Article: Gardening Bookshelf

Barbara Brill

Gardening Bookshelf

by Barbara Brill

MY CHILDHOOD WAS SPENT in an upstairs flat in a London suburb and apart from enjoyable days during the First World War watching my father cultivate his allotment I grew up with little experience of the skills of gardening. It has all had to be learnt by poring over books, picking up hints from gardeners, observing other people's gardens and by experimenting and learning by trial and error. Over the years my gardening bookshelf has become filled with much thumbed volumes that have grown into well-loved friends. The older I grow the more I realize that gardening can only be learnt by experience, by knowing your soil, the corners of your garden where the sun shines all day or where the damp collects, where there are patches of clay or where the convolvulus and mare's-tail will appear year after year however rigorously the weeding is done. But every year with the changing seasons I take down the old books and refresh my memory over small details of times of planting, depths, spacing, or proportions for potting composts. In recent years as chemical aids and labour saving devices flood the market I know that I shall not be able to find out about hormone rooting powders, peat pots or insecticides from my books but I can borrow those I need from the local library. I have come to prize my gardening bookshelf more for the memories it brings me of hours spent in our family garden than for the practical content.

Our first garden was in Surrey on a new housing estate and was no more than a rough meadow when we took over. In those early years I was immersed in mastering the arts of housekeeping and baby-rearing and had little time or energy for gardening, but I watched with admiration my husband transforming the wilderness into a little paradise with raised beds, crazy paving, and a tiny orchard of maiden apple trees. He displayed a flair for garden design and picked up hints from watching the gardeners at work in the London parks. The first gardening books to be placed on our reference shelf beside the *Best Way Cookery Book* and the *Motherhood Book* were four Cassell's gardening handbooks that my husband had bought secondhand before our marriage. They were first published in 1910, at a time when flower seeds were a penny a packet, and only cost 1s. 6d., less than half the price of today's paperbacks which would not last the half century these little books have done, with their firm binding, good paper and excellent illustrations. They were *Gardening Difficulties Solved, Sweet Peas and How to Grow Them, Bulb Growing for Amateurs* by H. H. Thomas, editor of *The Gardener*, and *First Steps in Gardening* by Walter Wright and Edward Castle. They were our A B C and I particularly remember how we studied the bulb book and grew some fine Darwen tulips that stood like soldiers under the window and were carefully dug up and graded according to Mr Thomas' instructions.

The next volume to be added was *The Gardener's Treasury of Plants, Trees and Shrubs*, a special second jubilee souvenir published by *Amateur Gardening* in 1935 at a very reasonable price. It is full of photographs and has been referred to constantly as we have searched for the names of flowers that have taken our fancy in other people's gardens or have been selecting new shrubs, climbers, or pot plants. I used it last year when re-planting the herbaceous border to judge the colours, heights and flowering times of the perennials.

We left our Surrey garden when the war came and we were moved to Cheshire, where we

bought a house with a much larger garden already laid out. We managed to cultivate an allotment as well, and we bought the Royal Horticultural Society's special booklet *The Vegetable Garden Displayed*, which became and has remained for twenty-five years our vademecum. It gives practical advice for the complete beginner with photographs demonstrating the mysteries of trenching, dibbing, earthing-up and staking and it helped us to keep the family and two billeted airmen supplied with vegetables in those lean days. Another activity we indulged in on the 'home front' was bee-keeping and J. G. Digges' *Practical Bee Guide* stands beside Maeterlinck's *The Story of the Bee* among our gardening books recalling the practical and romantic side of this fascinating hobby.

Our copies of W. E. Sewell Cooper's *A B C of the Flower Garden* and *A B C of the Greenhouse* each contain an inscription on the fly leaf in childish handwriting with birthday wishes to Daddy in the late 1940s. In those years after the war we eagerly began to experiment with bedding plants and flowers in the greenhouse. We fell in love with the dianthus family and sweet-williams filled our borders, and my husband grew perpetual flowering carnations in the greenhouse and was able to sport a buttonhole all the year round when he went to Manchester each day. Montague Allwood's *Carnations and All Dianthus* and *Carnations for Everyman* were added to our library after we visited the magnificent Allwood nurseries at Haywards Heath when we were holidaying in Sussex, and carnations held us in thrall for many years. Another speciality was the late chrysanthemum and we learnt the art of disbudding, stopping and feeding so that we had huge blooms to pick for Christmas, from studying *The Chrysanthemum Grower's Treasury* by A. J. Macself.

As the children grew up I was able to spend more time in the garden and by then the successes and failures over the years had taught me a good deal. I knew my way about our reference books and I began to add to our shelf books that I chose for my delight rather than for information. One of my most cherished possessions is a copy of *Gerard's Herbal, distilled by Marcus Woodward*, which I browse over for the beauty of the Elizabethan prose, not for practical advice. He writes of our beloved sweet-williams;

> These plants are not used either in meat or medicine but esteemed for their beauty to decke up gardens, the bosomes of the beautifull, garlands and crownes for pleasure.

Of flowers in general Gerard writes;

> For floures through their beauty, variety of colour and exquisite forme, do bring to a liberall and gentle manly minde, the remembrance of honestie and comeliness and all kinds of vertues.

This book and the little *Observer's Book of Garden Flowers* that is tucked in beside it give me a special pride of possession as they were bought with my first earnings as a journalist for a series of articles on wild flowers that I contributed to a local paper.

On my fiftieth birthday a friend gave me two volumes of *The Floral World* of 1872 and 1873. Many of the articles are contributed by gardeners of big estates and the descriptions of the conservatories, stove houses, grottoes, and ferneries conjure up a picture of a world that is gone when gardeners worked with young apprentices to create a garden such as Kipling described:

> that is full of stately views,
> With borders, beds and shrubberies and lawns and avenues,
> With statues on the terraces and peacocks strutting by,
> But the Glory of the Garden lies in more than meets the eye.
> For where the old thick laurels grow along the thin red wall,
> You find the tools and potting sheds that are the heart of all;
> The cold frames and the hot houses, the dung pits and the tanks
> The rollers, carts and drainpipes with the barrows and the planks.
> And there you'll see the gardeners, the men and 'prentice boys,
> Told off to do as they are bid and do it without noise . . .

Another gift was *Flower Growing in China* by E. H. M. Cox, which tells the story of the introduction of rhododendrons and azaleas into this country, and this year we have bought some of these enchanting shrubs from the author's own nursery in Scotland. We await their flowering with eager anticipation.

The latest additions have come from second-hand book shops. One is *Pansies and Violas* by William Cuthbertson, one of a series on individual flowers published in 1910 and edited by R. Hooper Pearson. As I was looking through it an old letter fell out which was written in that year to a gardener at one of the Manchester parks. Perhaps he too loved pansies as bedding plants as much as we do. I have always been moved almost to ecstasy by the exquisite perfection of a pansy's marking which is repeated with such exactitude down to the smallest streak of colour on each individual bloom on a plant. It seems as though a skilful water colourist

has been among them with his tiniest brush. *Pansies and Violas* is illustrated with coloured photographs of life-size flowers and I can feast my eyes on 'Purity', 'Snowflake', and 'Admiral of the Blues' when our pansy beds are bare in winter.

The other second-hand treasure is Mrs Loudon's *The Ladies' Companion to the Flower* of 1858. I had been intrigued to read recently about Jane Loudon's meeting with her husband John Claudius Loudon, one of the great gardening experts of the nineteenth century, who wrote prolifically on the subject. He had been sent a novel to review which was set in the year 2000 and when he arranged a meeting with the author to his surprise she turned out to be a young girl of twenty, Jane Webb. Through this meeting a friendship developed which grew into a love match and she became his wife. His love of gardens was infectious and they made a garden together in Bayswater with 2,000 plants and Jane began to write on the subject, particularly for ladies. I think that the ladies that Jane wrote for were primarily gardeners in a supervisory capacity and they used her *Companion* in order to instruct their gardeners in the best methods. I cannot imagine the Victorian ladies of Mrs Loudon's day 'killing snails and slugs by throwing them into a cistern or other very large vessel where they will soon be drowned', nor 'turning over decomposed stable dung during the summer every three or four weeks', as she advises. Her book, which is in dictionary form, defines mowing as 'an operation performed with the scythe' and goes on to mention 'a substitute for mowing that has lately been introduced in the form of a mowing machine . . . [which] is particularly adapted for amateurs, affording an excellent exercise to the arms and every part of the body, but it is proprer to observe that many gardeners are prejudiced against it'.

Mrs Loudon concludes her book with a quotation from John Ray, who wrote about gardens three hundred years ago;

> The love of such a master will keep each tender plant alive his skill and care have collected; for never was any art or excellence liked or loved by the ignorant: it is knowledge that begets affection and affection increases knowledge.

And this shall be the last word. My gardening books have increased my love of plants and my love of plants has sent me back to books for more knowledge.

AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION. Minimum standards for public library systems, 1966. Chicago, 1967. ix, 69 p. $1.75.

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While the text and standards remain much the same as those in *Public Library Service: a guide for evaluation, with minimum standards, 1956.* (A.L.A. 1956), there are a number of changes of interest.

Thinking is now more definitely along the lines of library systems than of individual libraries. The minimum population served by a library system is put at 150,000, implying continuation of the current movement towards the fully integrated system in which all publicly supported libraries and services are made freely available and play active parts in inter-library loans and the sharing of resources.

Sixty-six guiding principles cover the main areas: government, service, materials, staff and buildings. Over 150 standards are set out, the majority being indicative and generalized. Perhaps the most interesting pages for comparison with one's own library are 41-5, and 54-5. Here one finds actual figures and it is these which differ from the 1956 ideas. The following is a selection. System H.Q. should have at least 100,000 adult non-fiction volumes; about half of the new adult non-fiction titles in English published each year should be added. The total collection should have at least 2-4 volumes per head of population (two per head in areas serving over one million). Maintenance rate should be not less than one-sixth of a volume per head (up to half million population), one-eighth of a volume per head (over half million). One third of the annual additions should be for children; 5% of the total additions should be for young adults. Periodicals: one title for every 250 population, especially choosing those which are indexed. Sets should be kept for 10-15 years and unbound. There should be photocopying machinery. Indexing services should be widely available. Films: 1 title per 1,000 population, with at least 1,000 films in the collection. Recordings: 1 : 50 population, and at least 5,000 in the collection. Staff (professional and non-professional): 1 per 2,000 population. A library system needs at least 16-17 professional and sub-professional librarians for the different specializations provided, i.e. about one third in a staff of 50 serving 100,000 population.